

Managing a Nightmare

CIA Public Affairs and the Drug Conspiracy Story

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The charges could hardly be worse. A widely read newspaper series leads many Americans to believe CIA is guilty of at least complicity, if not conspiracy, in the outbreak of crack cocaine in America's inner cities. In more extreme versions of the story circulating on talk radio and the Internet, the Agency was the instrument of a consistent strategy by the US Government to destroy the black community and to keep black Americans from advancing. Denunciations of CIA—reminiscent of the 1970s—abound. Investigations are demanded and initiated. The Congress gets involved.

But, after this surge of publicity that questions the Agency's integrity, the media itself soon begins to question the veracity of the original story. A completely one-sided media campaign is averted, and reporting on the issue becomes polarized rather than wholly anti-CIA. By one count, press stories skeptical of the charges against CIA actually begin to outnumber those giving the story credence. A review of the CIA drug conspiracy story—from its inception in August 1996 with the *San Jose Mercury-News* stories—shows that a ground base of already productive relations with journalists and an effective response by the Director of Central Intelligence's (DCI) Public Affairs Staff (PAS) helped prevent this story from becoming an unmitigated disaster.

This success has to be viewed in relative terms. In the world of public relations, as in war, avoiding a rout in the face of hostile multitudes can

be considered a success. Obviously, it is not an ideal situation. We would rather promote CIA and its missions and people all the time, stopping occasionally only to correct errors in a reporter's story—but that is not realistic. As an important public relations resource book advises:¹

Crisis and controversy can strike any organization, regardless of its size or line of business...the rule is: Anything can happen. No organization with the remotest chance that its regimen could be upset by surprise happenings should fail to keep at least one eye open for the unexpected.... No organization can expect to be immune to events that engage public attention, affect key constituencies, and arouse emotions.

With the drug conspiracy allegations, public attention was certainly engaged, as the story was carried nationwide by major and local press, TV, and radio. Emotions were aroused. The more virulent of the public attacks against CIA charged the Agency with engaging in “chemical warfare,” “systematic genocide,” and “attempted mass murder” against black Americans.² Were “key constituencies” affected negatively by the story? Inasmuch as the American public is the ultimate “constituency” for any element of our democratic form of government, the answer has to be yes. The Congress—a constituency for CIA due to its budget and oversight responsibilities—also became involved. Finally, the men and women who work for CIA

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is in the Directorate of Intelligence.

Drug Conspiracy

themselves are a constituency; we all are affected to some degree by such allegations, and many of us have been confronted with questions about it from friends, neighbors, and others. By anyone's definition, the emergence of this story posed a genuine public relations crisis for the Agency.³

Alarming Allegations

The firestorm began when the *San Jose Mercury-News* ran its three-part series, "Dark Alliance," by staff writer Gary Webb. In the series, Webb alleged that the US-backed Contra rebels in Nicaragua forged a "union" with gangs in Los Angeles to sell tons of cocaine in black neighborhoods and to use "millions" of dollars in profits to fund the Contras' war against the Sandinista regime. "Dark Alliance" did not state outright that CIA ran the drug trade or even knew about it, but CIA complicity was heavily implied by the graphics accompanying the story and by the frequent use of the phrase "the CIA's army" to describe the Contras and anyone working with them.

The series appeared with no warning. Generally speaking, reporters working stories on CIA will call the PAS for comment, background, specific information, or requests to speak with retired Agency employees. Part of Public Affairs' planning for crisis involves an ongoing, active engagement with media representatives. The telephone and fax numbers for CIA Public Affairs are well known among US and foreign journalists, as evidenced by the quantity and variety of calls fielded every day by the Agency's media relations spokesmen. Webb, who reportedly investigated this story for a year, would later claim—during the media

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criticism that emerged in the coming weeks—that he tried to call the Agency but was unsuccessful: "Essentially, our trail stopped at the door of the CIA. *They wouldn't return my phone calls.*"⁴

CIA was caught unawares by the *Mercury-News* series because Gary Webb had never called or spoken with anyone on the PAS. Touted as an investigative journalist—Webb was named Northern California's Journalist of the Year for this series—he apparently could not come up with a widely available and well-known telephone number for CIA Public Affairs. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that he spoke to no one at CIA because he was uninterested in anything the Agency might have to say that would diminish the impact of his series.⁵

The story quickly spread through wire services and the *Mercury-News* website. CIA complicity in drug smuggling into US cities was more strongly implied or explicitly stated with every "bounce" of this story. Public Affairs received its first call on the story from a journalist on 21 August, the day after the series ended. In the first few days, CIA media spokesmen would remind reporters seeking comment that this series represented no real news, in that similar charges were made in the 1980s and were investigated by the Congress and were found to be without substance. Reporters were encouraged to

read the "Dark Alliance" series closely and with a critical eye to what allegations could actually be backed with evidence. Early in the life of this story, one major news affiliate, after speaking with a CIA media spokesman, decided not to run the story.

Gaining Momentum

The story languished with little attention for a week or so, during which DCI John Deutch received a letter from Representative Maxine Waters of California, who had asked for an investigation into the charges. In his response, the DCI reiterated his belief that the allegations were groundless: at the same time, he said, he was requesting a review by CIA's Inspector General (IG), in light of the serious nature of the charges. The Director sent a similar letter to Senator Barbara Boxer of California and to the chairmen of the House and Senate intelligence committees. At this point, the story began to pick up steam.

Because of the ongoing IG review, CIA was limited in its response, and requests for CIA spokesmen to appear on talk radio or TV programs had to be turned down. Nevertheless, Public Affairs emphasized to callers the independence of CIA's IG (although press commentary often distorted the IG review as an "in-house" or "internal" investigation) and that the Agency would willingly cooperate with any external investigation. Public Affairs also began to distribute to media contacts copies of the Director's letter to Waters, and, beginning in early September, many stories made use of the DCI's words.⁶

On 11 September, activist Dick Gregory and local Washington talk radio host Joe Madison were arrested

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at CIA's front gate when they insisted on personally delivering a letter to Director Deutch. This incident added momentum to the story. Overall coverage peaked over the next two weeks. Of particular concern to the CIA community was the fact that the majority of stories or commentaries in the press seemed to give credence—implicitly or explicitly—to the allegations of CIA complicity in drug smuggling.⁷

This heightened media interest was accomplished by a surge in the number of calls by journalists to CIA Public Affairs. This reflects the fact that most journalists are professionals genuinely interested in getting the story right. By the middle of September, Public Affairs was fielding calls from a variety of reporters who were skeptical of the allegations and who were planning to write articles casting doubt on the *Mercury-News* series. But the more balanced media treatment was still days or weeks away.

Meanwhile, CIA continued to get hammered. Joe Madison made CIA's "leading role" in the inner-city crack epidemic a daily subject in his local talk show. One nationally syndicated columnist pointed to Director Deutch's "typical vague denial" and called for "an investigation that can wring the truth out of the CIA, where coverups and 'plausible denials' are standard operating procedures." *Newsweek* quoted Maxine Waters saying "I think it is unconscionable that...the CIA could think so little of people of color that they would be willing to destroy generations in order to win the war in Nicaragua."⁸

The DCI addressed the charges on 19 September, when he testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI). That same

day, he met for an hour with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), members of which were denouncing CIA and seemed to be accepting the wider allegations—that CIA was part of an antiblack conspiracy—at face value.⁹ Wire services and others began to claim that the CIA's IG review came about because of pressure from the CBC. This connection was false; as noted earlier, the Director had ordered the IG review in early September.

Spreading Skepticism

That third week in September was a turning point in media coverage of this story. Respected columnists, including prominent blacks, began to question the motives of those who uncritically accepted the idea that CIA was responsible for destroying black communities. Others took a hard look at the evidence provided by the *Mercury-News*—something Public Affairs encouraged from the beginning—and found it unconvincing. A *New York Daily News* reporter concluded the *Mercury-News* series "just doesn't say what everybody seems to think it says." *The Baltimore Sun*, after running articles giving credence to the allegations, reported that the series was "weak" in documentation; the *Sun* also quoted a CIA spokesman to the effect that the *San Jose Mercury-News* never called CIA for comment and should have called "in the interest of fair and balanced reporting." *The Weekly Standard* published a piece that discredited the *Mercury-News*

series. *The Washington Post* ran two articles by leading journalists that criticized the assumptions and connections made by the original series. Public Affairs made sure that reporters and news directors calling for information—as well as former Agency officials, who were themselves representing the Agency in interviews with the media—received copies of these more balanced stories. Because of the *Post*'s national reputation, its articles especially were picked up by other papers, helping to create what the Associated Press called a "firestorm of reaction" against the *San Jose Mercury-News*.¹⁰

The *Mercury-News* soon found itself the target of so much media-generated criticism that it resorted to the unusual measure of scrutinizing its own series, addressing the criticism, and conceding the paper might have done some things differently, including calling the CIA, not using the CIA logo, clarifying its use of the term "CIA's army," and including a statement that the paper found no evidence that CIA ordered or sanctioned the drug trade.¹¹ One reporter of a major regional newspaper told Public Affairs that, because it had reprinted the *Mercury-News* stories in their entirety, his paper now had "egg on its face," in light of what other newspapers were saying.

By the end of September, the number of observed stories¹² in the print media that indicated skepticism of the *Mercury-News* series surpassed that of the negative coverage, which had already peaked. In fact, for three weeks the number of skeptical or positive pieces observed in the media constantly exceeded the number of negative treatments of CIA. After a brief surge in negative reporting in mid-October, the observed number of skeptical treatments of the alleged

Drug Conspiracy

CIA connection grew until it more than tripled the coverage that gave credibility to that connection. The growth in balanced reporting was largely due to the criticisms of the *San Jose Mercury-News* by *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*,¹³ and especially *The Los Angeles Times*.

In its own three-part series, *The Los Angeles Times* debunked Gary Webb's claims and insinuations regarding the alleged role of CIA in drug smuggling, the amount of money that went to the Contras, and even such basic elements of the story as the chronology of events. Published almost exactly two months after the *San Jose Mercury-News* stories, *The Los Angeles Times* series¹⁴ itself became a newsworthy story and was picked up by many media outlets across the country.

By the time the SSCI ended its first round of hearings on the matter in late October, the tone of the entire CIA-drug story had changed. Most press coverage included, as a routine matter, the now-widespread criticism of the *Mercury-News* allegations. DCI Deutch's much publicized "town meeting" in Watts in mid-November, other than sparking a small surge of stories, ironically seemed not to have made much difference on the generally factual character of news reporting—other than possibly generating some public sympathy for the way he was treated.

The Role of Public Affairs

Of the journalists and columnists who wrote pieces skeptical or critical of the CIA-cocaine connection, about one-third called Public Affairs before going to print. Some called to

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check facts; many called for an official CIA comment; most called for further information.

It is in providing information that Public Affairs can best do its job. I have spoken with some CIA employees who are angry that Public Affairs "does not do more" when adverse publicity hits the papers; a few even seem to think CIA can and should write the media's stories for them. It is important to reiterate that the PAS aims above all to inform rather than to pressure or to persuade. When dealing with the media, the rule practiced by Public Affairs is to provide as much information as possible, consistent with the need to protect sensitive information, sources, and methods. Often, CIA spokesmen cannot comment. Frequently, they can say something to the media, but it can take days to figure out within the Agency what it is that can be said. For example, in order to help a journalist working on a story that would undermine the *Mercury-News* allegations, Public Affairs was able to deny any affiliation of a particular individual—which is a rare exception to the general policy that CIA does not comment on any individual's alleged CIA ties. But coordinating that response took time.

Because of CIA's secret history and public interest in its work, whatever CIA spokesmen say—even denials—can make news. So Public Affairs fields a lot of calls from journalists—up to 300 a month, if CIA is having a particularly bad time—and these

journalists tend to pay attention to the information CIA provides. CIA benefits from the good track record the PAS has with journalists for returning phone calls promptly, providing background briefings on occasion, and helping journalists as much as possible. This record gives CIA a certain level of credibility when a public relations crisis occurs.

Public Affairs cannot dictate stories to the media—nor would we want to live in a society where that was possible. CIA's relationship with the media can be an extremely sensitive matter, as demonstrated by the public flap in 1996 over the possible intelligence use of information from journalists. What CIA media spokesmen can do, as this case demonstrates, is to work with journalists who are already disposed toward writing a balanced story. Even when dealing with a breaking story that puts the Agency in a bad light, CIA Public Affairs can help the journalist with information he might not have or a perspective that might not have crossed his mind. The result is a more balanced story: better for the reporter, because the facts are right; better for CIA, because the Agency gets a fairer hearing; and better for the public, which is better informed than it otherwise might be. In a few cases, it may be possible, through simply providing information, to change the mind of a reporter whose initial inclinations toward CIA were negative but who is willing to listen to the other side of the story. The influence Public Affairs wields has its limits, but at least it exists.

Some Self-Policing

What gives this limited influence a "multiplier effect" is something that surprised me about the media: that the journalistic profession has the will and the ability to hold its own members to certain standards. This self-policing phenomenon reached its apogee early in 1997, when the *American Journalism Review* (AJR) published a skeptical piece on "The Web That Gary Spun." This piece also revealed that some of Gary Webb's harshest critics were his own colleagues on the *Mercury-News* staff. The editor of the AJR later wrote that the *Mercury-News* deserved all the heat leveled at it for "Dark Alliance." The criticism from within the journalistic community had its effect; in May 1997, the executive editor of the *Mercury-News* made nationwide news by apologizing in print for the flaws and shortcomings of "Dark Alliance." This mea culpa was reported by every major newspaper in the country.¹⁵

The CIA-drug story has largely run its course. It is by no means a dead issue, however. The *Mercury-News* disclaimer "didn't change things at all" for Representative Waters, and she continued to conduct her own investigation.¹⁶ She and other critics publicly disparaged CIA again in late 1997, when the IG announced its investigation came up with no evidence to support the charges. About the same time, Gary Webb resigned from the *Mercury-News*. He evidently is considering writing a book in which he would expand his theories to include the notion that the war in Nicaragua—far from being a battle in the Cold War—was not a real conflict at all but rather a charade to cover up drug smuggling by rogue CIA agents. As Howard Kurtz

of *The Washington Post* remarked, "Oliver Stone, check your voice mail."¹⁷

A Question of Trust

There will be other public relations crises with which CIA will have to contend. As John Ranelagh suggested 10 years ago in his history of CIA,¹⁸ the attitude of the American people toward the Agency parallels its view of government generally; when the public's trust in politicians and government institutions sinks, CIA can expect to be a target, with the media the obvious delivery vehicle. If historians such as Samuel Huntington and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., are correct, we can expect periodic displays of public distrust in government roughly every 20 to 30 years—and we are just beginning such a phase.¹⁹ In such times, even fantastic allegations about CIA—JFK's assassination, UFO coverups, or importing drugs into America's cities—will resonate with, and even appeal to, much of American society. At those times, it is especially important to have a professional public affairs staff help limit the damage and facilitate more balanced coverage of CIA.

Societal Shortcomings

As a personal postscript, I would submit that ultimately the CIA-drug story says a lot more about American society on the eve of the millennium than it does about either CIA or the media. We live in somewhat coarse and emotional times—when large numbers of Americans do not adhere to the same standards of logic, evidence, or even civil discourse as those practiced by members of the

CIA community.²⁰ Venom against "CIA thuggery" can still be found in place of reasoned discourse in the public square. "Freeway Ricky" Ross, whom all agree actually brought the drugs into Los Angeles, was treated with deference and even respect on talk shows, while CIA—which is helping fight the drug scourge—was dragged through the mud. Public hearings on the allegations—even Congressional hearings—were marked by jeering or cheers from audiences less interested in truth than in having personal beliefs vindicated. Journalists who wrote articles skeptical of the charges against CIA were pilloried in print—one was accused of serving as a CIA lackey—and even threatened with physical harm over their articles.

Because of episodes like the drug story, some Agency employees might conclude that there is scant public appreciation of their dedication and hard work and of the fact, that as citizens themselves, they are just as outraged as any other responsible group in American society about the damage done by drug trafficking. But most CIA employees probably will see the drug story as yet another bum rap—one that, in this case, was belatedly acknowledged as such by reputable journalists.

NOTES

1. See the chapter on "Crisis Communications: Dealing With the Unforeseen," in Robert Dillenschneider and Dan Forrestal, *The Dartnell Public Relations Handbook* (Chicago: Dartnell, 1990), pp. 330-347; emphasis by the author.
2. For example, "State NAACP Vows To Act on CIA-drug Reports," *The Sunday Record* (New Jersey),

Drug Conspiracy

- 29 September 1996. See also Paul Shepard, "CIA Drug Allegations Revive Black Fears of Anti-Black Conspiracy," Associated Press, 5 October 1996.
3. In October 1996, I went on a speaking tour to Brigham Young University, Washington and Jefferson College, and the US Coast Guard Academy. While I encountered no hostility at any of these institutions, one of the first questions raised in Q&A was the drug conspiracy issue.
 4. Quoted in Howard Kurtz, "Running With the CIA Story," *The Washington Post*, 2 October 1996, p. B1. Emphasis by the author.
 5. According to journalism's primary trade journal, Webb's former employer, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, lost a libel suit and was assessed over \$13 million in damages because of stories Webb wrote that alleged improprieties surrounding the Cleveland Grand Prix. See Susan Revah, "A Furor Over the CIA and Drugs," *American Journalism Review*, November 1996, p. 11. Those who followed General Westmoreland's unsuccessful suit against CBS several years ago can appreciate how difficult it is to win a libel suit against the press.
 6. For example, "Deutch Orders CIA Probe of Drug Reports," *The Washington Post*, 7 September 1996, p. A1.
 7. Typical pieces included: Andrea Lewis, "A CIA Plot Against Black America? Crack Sales May Not Be Just a Case of Paranoia," *The Baltimore Sun*, 15 September 1996, p. E1; Annette Leslie Williams, "Probe CIA Drug Ties to Bloody L.A. Gangs," *USA Today*, 13 September 1996, p. 15A; and Jesse Jackson, "Did the CIA Trade Lives for Contra Funds?," *The Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 1996, p. M5.
 8. Jeffrey York, "Joe Madison, Leading the Charge," *The Washington Post*, 17 September 1996, p. B7. Carl T. Rowan, "Some Answers, Please!," *The Baltimore Sun*, 18 September 1996, p. 19A. Gregory Vistica and Vern Smith, "Was the CIA Involved in the Crack Epidemic?" *Newsweek*, 30 September 1996, p. 72.
 9. Congressman Waters was only the most vocal of the Congressional critics. For example, Congressman Cynthia McKinney on the House floor called CIA the "Central Intoxication Agency." See Jim Wolf, "CIA on Defensive Over Drug-Peddling Charges," Associated Press, 18 September 1996.
 10. William Raspberry, "The Crack Story: Who's Buying It?," *The Washington Post*, 23 September 1996, p. A19. Claude Lewis, "Even if the CIA Flooded Inner Cities with Crack, Blacks Didn't Say 'No'," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 September 1996, p. A23. Lars Erik Larsen, "Contra-Coke Tale Is Not What It's Cracked Up To Be," *New York Daily News*, 25 September 1996. Mark Matthews, "CIA's Dubious role in Crack Deals," *The Baltimore Sun*, 27 September 1996, p. 2A. Tucker Carlson, "A Disgraceful Newspaper Exposé and Its Fans," *The Weekly Standard*, 30 September 1996, pp. 27-30. Howard Kurtz, "Running with the CIA Story," *The Washington Post*, 2 October 1996, p. B1. Robert Suro and Walter Pincus, "The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot," *The Washington Post*, 4 October 1996, p. A1. The Associated Press reported on *The Washington Post's* critical treatment of the story, which in turn received some "bounce" among newspapers: see, for example, "CIA Drug Link Report Challenged," *Miami Herald*, 5 October 1996. See also Associated Press, "Mercury News Has Reporter Evaluate CIA-Contra-Crack Series," 21 October 1996.
 11. Pete Carey, "'Dark Alliance' Series Takes on a Life of its Own," *San Jose Mercury-News*, 13 October 1996.
 12. PAS Research and Services staff regularly clips articles relevant to intelligence and national security issues.
 13. Tim Golden, "Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has Life of Its Own," *The New York Times*, 21 October 1996, p. A1.
 14. Doyle McManus, "The Cocaine Trail," three-part series, *The Los Angeles Times*, 20-22 October 1996.
 15. Alicia Shepard, "The Web That Gary Spun," *American Journalism Review*, January/February 1997. Rem Rieder, "The Lessons of Dark Alliance," *American Journalism Review*, June 1997. Jerry Ceppos, "To Readers of Our 'Dark Alliance' Series," *San Jose Mercury-News*, 11 May 1997.
 16. Robyn Gearey, "Troubled Waters," *The New Republic*, 30 June 1997.
 17. Eleanor Randolph and John Broder, "Cyberspace Contributes to Volatility of Allegations," *The Los Angeles Times*, 22 October 1996, p. 14. Howard Kurtz, "A Webb of Conspiracy," *The Washington Post*, 28 October 1996, p. A12.
 18. John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), pp. 532-533.
 19. Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).
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